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JPL site added to list posing health risks

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PASADENA — The Jet Propulsion Laboratory has been added to the nation's Superfund priority list, requiring investigation and cleanup of contaminated ground water, federal officials said Wednesday.

The Superfund National Priorities List of sites includes those the Environmental Protection Agency considers to pose the greatest long-term health and environmental risks.

The designation requires JPL to determine the scope and risk of contamination and to develop a cleanup plan, said Lois Grunwald, a spokeswoman for the federal agency's western regional office in San Francisco.

JPL and federal officials have begun negotiations on what studies

are necessary and potential remedies, a process that could take months, Grunwald said.

JPL, which has expected the priority designation for at least a year, already has begun developing a plan to assess the contamination and risks at the site, said Charles Buri, manager of environmental affairs for JPL.

"We are in the process of determining the full extent of contamination," Buri said. "We have already implemented a portion of that plan to get a jump on things."

Local water officials said they were pleased that the EPA selected the laboratory for its Superfund priority designation because it would prompt remediation.

"We're looking forward to them getting that cleaned up so it will preserve the ground-water basin for the future," said Ronald C. Palmer,

general manager of the Foothill Municipal Water District.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, which assumed operations of the laboratory from the Army in 1958, discovered ground-water contamination on the 176-acre site in a series of studies that began in 1988, prompting the shutdown of six local drinking-water wells.

Two of the wells remain closed while four others were reopened in October 1990 after the city of Pasadena installed a treatment system funded in part by JPL.

EPA and JPL officials attribute much of the contamination to the dumping in the 1940s and '50s of waste solvents, such as solid rocket fuel propellants, cooling tower chemicals, sulfuric acid, Freon, mercury and chemical laboratory wastes.